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THE FUTURE OF OUR PAST: Hungary's Cultural Struggle with its Communist Legacy

Enikő Bollobás

I. Introduction

These are transitory times, haunted by the times they follow rather than determined by the times they precede. Retrospective rather than anticipatory. Françoise Thom, professor of Contemporary History at the Sorbonne, uses the image of Chernobyl as the metaphor for our times: communism ends like Chernobyl, leaving radioactive material all around that requires decades or centuries to be destroyed.¹ Hungary's leading sociologist, Rudolf Andorka, refers to Ralf Dahrendorf's thesis positing that whereas political changes to parliamentary democracy need six months and the improvement in economic well-being of East and Central European countries may need only six years to solidify, the development of a democratic culture might take sixty years.²

The example of Moses in the Old Testament offers consolation to those frustrated by the slow pace of mental and cultural change in Hungary. Fearing that the children of Israel might want to return to the bondage of Egypt if they encountered hardships and war, God let the people wander in the wilderness for forty years until the generation born under bondage died out.³ Today, Hungary's "generation of bondage" is still very much alive.

What is all this? Pitch-dark pessimism or mindless optimism? "Was it Heaven? Or Hell?" we could ask with Mark Twain. Two or three years ago, Hungarians would have spoken of the reference to Moses with a distancing smile: yes, but we are bound to do better than that. They would have considered Dahrendorf's thesis overly pessimistic. Today people might accuse Dahrendorf of being too optimistic: mental and cultural changes seem to take several generations indeed, and economic transformation needs more than six years. Actually, can we state with certainty that the political changes are final and irreversible? Can

we realistically hope that the nuclear waste left behind by communism will *ever* disappear?

Or — and this is the gravest issue — do people really *want* to wipe out communism and all its legacy? Have mentalities changed to such a degree that people should want to forget about the communist era for good? How do they see their future? What is their attitude toward democracy and a market economy? How do they view themselves?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions by:

1. Reviewing the political and economic changes that have occurred since 1990.
2. Examining the mentalities that prevail in a postcommunist country like Hungary and are at the root of much of its difficulties. I am most interested in (a) the survival of the mentality of dependency, (b) the prevailing atmosphere of envy, and (c) the lack of democratic education, including the fragility of the culture of negotiation and compromise.
3. Examining how this cultural climate affects women and intellectuals.
4. Discussing the “co-responsibility” of the West.

II. Political and Economic Changes since 1990

In the early 1990s, Hungary became a driving force of the Central European region, the first in several ways. Hungary was, for example, the first country in Central and Eastern Europe to be admitted into various organizations of European integration such as the Council of Europe. The last Soviet troops left in 1991, making it possible to put Hungary's relations with Russia and the Ukraine on a new footing. The country was obviously advancing toward European Union membership. Hungary's good international standing trickled down, we might say, to the ordinary citizen as well, who now does not need a visa to visit any European country, not even Israel (in which case Hungary was again the first). The world appreciated the security and stability inside the country, as well as the peace that had to be maintained every day along the 300-kilometer stretch of the southeastern border with the former Yugoslavia.

Hungary attracted more than half of all foreign investment going into the entire region. Many of the state-owned enterprises were dismantled; privatization was conducted gradually but with full vigor. Unemployment, at 12 percent, seemed high but was still less than in some of the more developed countries, such as France. Hungarian politicians could afford to think long-term, with the future as a priority, for which the hardships of the present might be justly traded. This is the vision that put emphasis on infrastructure, education, and telecommunication. Socially, Hungary was praised for its stability: in spite of the hardships, Hungarians pulled through without significant social unrest. Most Hungarians liked the fact that, unlike in some other countries, no “decommunization” (purging of former communists) occurred, even though the majority of Hungary’s 1990–94 Parliament was noncommunist and though the members of government were all pro-Western professionals.

In the spring of 1994, Hungarians voted the old regime’s communist politicians back into power. Of course, Hungary was not the only country in Central and Eastern Europe where the “ghost people,” as the *New York Times* calls the former communists, returned;⁴ it followed the example of Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland. Only in this respect was Hungary different: the voters replaced the only Central and East European cabinet containing *no* former communists with a government that had, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, more than 200 years of membership in the old Communist Party.⁵ And since Hungary had led among the countries of the region in so many respects, following the East European trend came as a surprise to many observers.

A Gallup poll was released right after the elections in the Hungarian weekly *Beszélő* (2 June 1994), a journal close to the Alliance of Free Democrats, the junior coalition partner to the Socialists in the new government. The poll revealed extremely disturbing facts about the attitude of voters toward the market reforms introduced during the previous four years. Clearly, supporters of the winning Socialist Party were most opposed to a free market economy and the predominance of private property and were the most nostalgic for government redistribution of income. These were the voters who brought the Socialist Party to victory; they clearly said no to much that had happened

between 1990 and 1994 in the dismantling of communist structures.

"Illusion is reality," a public relations expert says. People, with their nostalgic votes, articulated their preference for illusion rather than reality: they were nostalgic for the 1970s and 1980s, when foreign loans (originally taken for infrastructural investments but actually spent on consumer goods as well as gigantic, wasteful, and harmful projects like the Danube Dam) granted higher living standards than Hungary's real economic output would have allowed. For decades, Hungary, under communist leadership, was, in the words of Hungarian-born Harvard economist János Kornai, eating up its tomorrow and thus "discounting its future."⁶ Indeed, it was a short-term vision, its priority lying only in the present. The consequences are bitter: Hungary now has the highest per capita debt in Europe.

In 1994, Hungarians voted for illusion rather than reality in another sense as well: the illusion of being better off than other Central and East Europeans. They wished to go back to those times when standards of living were easily kept highest relative to the region. Traveling into Hungary from the south and the east is, I am often told, like entering a different and better world — a world somewhat like the one in Zoltán Kodály's comic opera *Háry János*, which portrays Hungary through the benevolent mirror of Hungarian folk and fairy tales. In this amusing opera, otherwise full of self-criticism, the "Hungarian-Russian" border divides two contrasting worlds of good and bad, of eternal summer and everlasting winter. I often think that Hungarians — who took their comparatively higher living standards for granted — believed that such a contrast between Hungary and the other countries of the region justifiably existed not only in fairy tales and comic operas. The population's "fairytale" perception of Hungary, maintained by the illusory policies of the 1970s and '80s, was shattered during the unexpected hardships and difficulties of the country's transition, leaving Hungarians disappointed with the current state of affairs.

III. Mentalities

A. The Mentality of Dependency

The mentalities of today's Hungarians were largely shaped during the forty-odd years of communism. But these mentalities were not born during the communist decades, when conscious efforts were made to cut off the past. Communism taught Hungarians a strange relationship to history. Generations grew up with the belief that a new era began with the communists. "B.C." — "before communism" — times were sometimes given a distorted narrative.

János Kádár, the party chief responsible for the repression following the 1956 uprising and the subsequent decades of "goulash communism," learned a bitter lesson from 1956: special methods were needed to make Hungarians swallow communism. Thus, a soft version of dictatorship was invented. In return for benefits unparalleled in Central and Eastern Europe, Hungarians became Kádár's accomplices in the common effort to live better. Kádár's political gesture was the significant wink. "Let us not provoke Moscow's anger: promise me that no more 'fifty-sixes will occur, and, in exchange, I will make you the star country on the block," the wink said. They soon became party to the deal. Society was self-contained, excesses were curbed, censorship was self-imposed. Journalists and historians went along with never referring to the "events" of 1956 or the lives of Hungarian minorities in the neighboring "brotherly" countries. Television commentators enthusiastically condemned Israel's "aggression" in 1967. These same reporters spoke about brotherly help to the "Czechoslovak people" in 1968 and to the Afghan people in 1981.

What did Hungarians receive from Kádár for looking the other way? The soft eiderdown of a more permissive totalitarianism. Party membership was not forced: only about every sixth person of the wage-earning population was a cardholding member of the Communist Party (800,000 out of a population of 10 million). Travel was liberalized: every third year, Hungarians were allowed to travel to the West (unless their passports were refused) and exchange currency, from \$70 in the 1970s to \$300 in the 1980s. They enjoyed job security without being required to

work hard or provide quality work; they enjoyed existential security in the form of their evening beer and Sunday *wiener schnitzel*. They could afford certain other luxuries as well, such as working their vegetable gardens on the weekends, and, provided they paid full price for the car three to five years in advance, they could, in due time, own a Polski Fiat or Skoda.

Kádár bought the collaboration of a nation with peanuts. His “pact,” however, fostered a set of destructive mentalities: the *mentality of dependency* and the *culture of envy*, both related to the materialistic concerns of the societies of communist Central and Eastern Europe. I would like to make it clear that communism bred societies that were — and still are — significantly more materialistic than their Western counterparts. Material possessions are proportionately more valued in these countries and, therefore, can be used as bargaining chips to a greater extent than in Western democracies.

It is understandable that thoroughly materialistic societies evolved in communist Central and Eastern Europe. People who must dedicate much of their energy to satisfying their daily physical needs cannot be expected to pursue higher self-actualizing goals. Foreign visitors to Eastern and Central Europe will probably agree when I say that mere existence requires a much more constant effort than in Western countries. There are two reasons for this. One, the buying power of an average Hungarian salary is less than one-tenth of the U.S. average. This Hungarian salary pays for about fifteen times fewer loaves of bread, gallons of gasoline, square feet of real estate, and automobiles, thus leaving very little for “extras.” In fact, 85 to 90 percent of the average Hungarian family income has to be spent on groceries, housing, and utilities. The second reason is harder to grasp but is related to the underdeveloped nature of infrastructure and services. The practical maintenance of an everyday routine seems to be the chief goal of life in Eastern Europe, rather than being subordinate to other activities or a “higher” objective. Abraham H. Maslow’s pyramid may provide an explanation: According to Maslow’s theory of human motivation, one’s basic needs for food and shelter represent the base of the pyramid. At the top of the pyramid are one’s needs for self-respect and self-actualization. However, only *after* the lower physical needs, as well as the need for love and security, are satisfied can

an individual develop and satisfy the higher motivations. With Hungarian technological levels low, people remained — out of necessity — at the base of Maslow's pyramid.

For a large segment of society, the mentality of dependency may not have weakened in the past few years; rather, it seems to have been reinforced — as well as exploited — by the economic and political developments of the postcommunist times. It is this mentality — the lack of self-confidence and the incapability of Hungarian workers “to think for themselves” — that shocked foreign investors in Hungary, such as General Electric.

Economists have talked about the dangers of “Latin Americanization” in Hungary. Latin Americanization occurs when a thin layer of society becomes very rich, while the rest of society is lagging behind. It has clear economic, political, and cultural causes and effects. The phenomenon of Latin Americanization can best be understood by analyzing the new economic elite rising in the CEE countries. Where do they come from? Where did they find the initial capital (in the late 1980s and early 1990s) in these generally capital-poor economies? Political scientists and sociologists have shown clearly that in Poland, Hungary, and Russia, especially, the former communists have been the chief financial beneficiaries of the economic reforms. British political scientist Anne Applebaum talks of the revival of the old Italian model in Central Europe, which was composed of “corrupt regimes led by former communist parties that rely on a semi-mafia business class composed mostly of former communists.” Applebaum continues, “Links between ex-*nomenklatura* capitalists and ex-communist politicians remain intact...creating a ruling class that holds power in several fields, with little room for real competition in political or economic debates.”⁸

Sociologists in Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary have traced the careers of several hundred new businessmen and found ex-*nomenklatura* in high numbers. The conversion of political power into economic power is typical of the region. Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss talks about the new *grande bourgeoisie*, ex-*nomenklatura* oligarchic families of the late 1980s converting their power by becoming institutionalized in diverse areas of the economy. He and his team examined hundreds of diversified oligarchic families, where typically the grandfather would be the one-time party *apparatchik*, the son a manager of a joint ven-

ture, the daughter an editor for Hungarian television, the son-in-law a boutique owner, the nephew a student at Oxford, etc. Hankiss points to other ways of power conversion: when state companies are privatized and reserve wealth is created by the oligarch's own fiat. In all cases, the new *grande bourgeoisie* of Hungary's market economy has invisible yet powerful communist roots.⁹ It is no wonder that Hungarian communists are half-jokingly said to have retained only capital from Marx.

The ex-communist oligarchic community seems to constitute the richest layer of Hungary's Latin Americanizing society. Under such conditions, it is very difficult for those who fall outside this oligarchic network to be competitive. Other developments seem also to run counter to market competition. The taking back of the administration in Hungary by ex-communists through purges and sweeping personnel changes fits into this trend as well. Applebaum writes of the stultifying effect lack of competition has on politics and economy; it also goes counter to the kind of capitalism and political openness Hungary's progressive forces chose. The Copenhagen Document of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), for example, states that "the representative nature of government must also be reflected in the administration, through equal access of all citizens to political and public office." There are ministries in Hungary in which most of those hired between 1990 and 1994 have been dismissed. In many cases the political motivation of these purges is clear. Depriving citizens of equal access to administrative offices sends a negative signal — both inside and outside of the country. Externally, it speaks about Hungary hovering between the cultures of Eastern and Western Europe; internally, it creates an atmosphere of fear not conducive to democracy.

B. Atmosphere of Envy

In the previous section, we saw how Hungarian communism relegated the individual to the status of a minor, dependent upon the good will and permissiveness of authority and power. The state provided its dependents—or, to use Plato's term from the *Republic*, "auxiliaries"—with basic, albeit false, securities. For a long time, people believed that this indeed was a pact, a

naturally beneficial deal made with the consent of both parties. It was assumed that the hand that took was the hand that gave as well. It is becoming more and more clear, however, that the giving part was deceitful; as long as people were provided with only the fish but not the net, they had no urge (or opportunity) to do the fishing themselves, and as long as enterprises received state subsidies, they had no motivation to earn their own profit and no opportunity (or need) to compete with others in an open market.

During the forty to forty-five years of communist rule, Hungarian society became homogenized at the lowest level; some say it was "proletarianized," with living standards lowered to where, indeed, everyone could be "equal." Communists did not tolerate "difference" well. The conscious efforts to level social status and individual achievements were successful, especially in the state sector, where outstanding work was not rewarded with higher wages or promotion and where poor performance was accepted as the average. Mediocrity became the ideal. Homogenization worked.

This homogenized society still exists today, except for a few entrepreneurs and businessmen who were able to break out of it and generate a lot of money in a little time. Opportunities have multiplied not only for businesses but for practically everyone skilled in some profession. The market for skills has become most complex, and the person with outstanding talent, performance, or vision can be competitive.

The era of a shortage of goods—which characterized communism's four decades—is over, and shops are loaded with goods. One sees Mercedes-Benzes and Jaguars on Hungarian roads, and travel agencies can do good business by taking their clients to the Bahamas or Bermuda. The new possibilities for some Hungarians to "make it" frustrate many of their already bitter and depressed compatriots, especially those who are very dependent on the state. These first signs of affluence seem to have disappointed those who could not enjoy such new pleasures. A special kind of envy is widespread; many do not want to see anyone succeed. People still think in terms of a zero-sum game, as they did during communist days: one person's gain is another person's loss. It is a world exemplified by the joke "What's the difference between a Western European farmer and

an Eastern European farmer?" The answer is, "The Western European farmer sees his neighbor's cow and asks God if he can have one, too; the East European asks God to kill the neighbor's cow."

This atmosphere of envy combined with the mentality of dependency makes it very hard for many to cope with the changes. There are two important scenarios here. In the scenario of dependency, the potential East European businessman backs away from going into business. This is the real stumbling block. As the late Rita Klimova, the Czech Ambassador to the U.S., said, "What can you tell a person in Central and Eastern Europe who, for the first time in his life, pictures the possibility that he might even *lose* the money he plans to invest in his business?" Without the tradition of individualism, without the models of self-reliance and "the different drummer" as ideals of autonomous living, it is very difficult to spread market values in Central and Eastern Europe. In this particular instance, this person weighs the advantages of winning against those of losing (both in the realm of the unfamiliar), then looks at his life as he knows it (in the realm of the familiar), and decides to stay with the modest but familiar lifestyle.

In the second scenario the businessman is successful. Soon, however, he is sobered by the manifestations of envy—his car is vandalized in the middle of the night, his children are humiliated at school, and stories of corruption and adultery are circulated about him. No Protestant ethic of deserved wealth comes to his rescue. In this situation, the rich, instead of fulfilling new responsibilities to help the poor and pursue all kinds of philanthropic activities (like sponsoring the arts) to the benefit of society, will often hide and cover up their success. In reality, this culture of envy has actually kept him from sharing the fruits of his labor with those in need. In the end, society has been left empty-handed.

C. Lack of Democratic Education

Although Hungarians have lived better than their neighbors for decades, they have been continuously less satisfied with their life conditions.¹⁰ Foreign visitors are baffled by what they see as Hungarian pessimism. Some say Hungarians' complaining is a

reaction to their compulsory optimism under communism. They refuse to be spoon-fed another promise of a bright future. But pessimism and optimism are relative terms. Imagine two people inspecting a vineyard after a devastating early frost. One of them is gloomy about the harvest. The other is filled with joy over the signs of life he finds in spite of the frost. Is one the pessimist, the other the optimist? While they both see the same vineyard, their assessments are different depending upon how they view the predictable (or whether they base their expectations on reality at all). Hungary's vineyard is devastated no matter how we look at it. Forty years of wasteful economic practices and political mismanagement cannot be easily undone. To those suffering in the period of political and economic changes, democracy and market economy have become increasingly equated with poverty.

The old communist system did everything in its power to limit and control the disenfranchised masses' knowledge of the society they lived in. Only a select few were in the know about how political decisions were reached in the Politbüro or the Central Committee, how much certain industries received in state subsidies, how much the national debt amounted to, or how many people had escaped from the country throughout the years. Political education covered the "History of the Workers' Movement" but taught nothing about how democracies or their own societies really functioned. Whole scholarly fields were missing from the curricula of Political Science and Economics departments in universities. "No wonder," political scientists remark today, with a certain self-criticism. "Formerly all were Marxist; today all proclaim themselves liberal."¹¹

According to a research project conducted by leading psychologists on the legal-constitutional knowledge of adolescents, "democracy terms" pose special problems to Hungarian teenagers. They are unfamiliar with such concepts as *solidarity*, *social safety*, and *citizenship*. Also, they seem to overvalue the authority of the *state*, *parent*, and *teacher*. According to another poll conducted in March 1995 by the Hungarian public opinion firm Sonda Ipsos, the percentage of Hungarians who consider democratic values such as freedom of expression and freedom of the press important is alarmingly low — 6 percent and decreasing.

These findings are not restricted to adolescents, nor, based on the past four decades of political “un-education,” are they that surprising. Hungarians have very little idea of the mechanisms of democracies; they are taught no such subject as Government or Citizenship. Another poll conducted by a U.S. firm investigated how the average Hungarian citizen reacted to the principles of democracy, a free parliamentary system, and a free market economy. “As they watch politicians debate legislation,” says Daniel Odescalchi, the author of the poll,

taking part in what we would refer to as a healthy exchange of ideas, the post-communist citizen watches in horror. For the past forty-five years they were accustomed to a one-party system. Parliament was just a rubber stamp, a theater created to give the impression of self-rule to Hungarians. In Parliament, MPs would fall in place according to rank and file. It was unheard of to debate or “argue” among themselves. Today, as in any multi-party political environment, the politician in Hungary debates issues and, for the most part, votes along party lines. How does the Hungarian citizen view this? Certainly not like we do in mature democracies. Here in Hungary, this healthy exchange of ideas symbolizes “chaos.” They feel that “the government has lost control” and “the country is falling apart.” Hungarians remember back to when the government was “in order” and blame the present parties for this “confusion.” Initial research showed that there is a segment of the population that hopes the old guard would get a large enough percentage of the vote so that they would not need a coalition partner to govern. These people said that a coalition partner would only “interfere with the work” and “argue, impede getting things done.” Although this is a smaller segment of the population, we see the one party system, because of its simplicity, makes more sense to them.¹²

To Odescalchi’s interpretation of why Hungarians watch parliamentary debates with horror, I would add the weakness of the culture of negotiation. Hungary is on the borderline of two geopolitical regions that differ, for one, according to how political and social disagreements are solved. Risking generalization, I would argue that west of the border, disagreements are solved by negotiation and compromise, but east of it the immediate instinct is conflict and violence. Western Europe has, in the last

decades, institutionalized a culture of negotiation and compromise in such integrative organizations as the EU and NATO, while the Eastern block countries have not developed similar skills in the comparable organizations of the Warsaw Pact and COMECON.

Returning to the more specific topic of Hungary, the frailty of democratic education, as well as education about market principles and the weakness of the culture of negotiation, have made it very difficult for Hungarians to cope with the changes. The still unresolved problems among the nations, especially the ethnic ones, can be explained in part by the inability to understand and empathize with the problems of others.

The American pollsters draw a sobering conclusion about Hungarian society. "Democracy has injected confusion where before life was disciplined, preplanned and unchangeable. The same society today reacts to markets, influences politics and is having to deal with the unplanned collapse of the only system which it knew," writes Odescalchi. "One politician compared the people's reaction to that of a tiger who grew up in captivity. When his cage is placed in the wild and the gate is opened, the tiger will stick his head out, look around and then sit down in the doorway. In 1990, Hungarians opened the gate when they voted against communism. Now they have sat down in the doorway."¹³

IV. Women in PostCommunist Hungary

In order to understand the situation of women today, one must realize that the "women's problem" in communist Hungary was quite complex. Women were not only victims of communism's totalitarian grip, but also of the patriarchal traditions so widespread in other parts of Europe, especially the Slavic countries. In prewar Hungary, paternalistic and authoritarian attitudes toward women were reinforced by the anachronistic social atmosphere of the Horthy regime. The legacy of limited choices, traditional feminine ideals, a secondary role for women, and a general insensitivity to women's issues was, to a certain degree, shared by both Western and Eastern Europe until the social necessities created by the war and, later, the women's movement of the 1960s, brought about fundamental changes. In the

Eastern part of an artificially divided Europe, however, such changes did not happen; there, the communists halted all spontaneous social development, petrifying certain spheres of life. Prewar mentalities survived in a peculiar communist distortion.

Observers, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, often misapprehended the role women played in Hungary. Visitors could easily get the impression that women were very “Western” in Budapest: they dressed well, were educated, and led a semi-Western lifestyle. What was not visible to short-term tourists, however, was how much time, money, and energy had to be spent in keeping up this seemingly Western — but still immensely modest — lifestyle. Because they lived in a communist country with patriarchal roots, they suffered a double dependency, their lives controlled politically by the state and their genders controlled by a male-dominated society. It was a “double burden” of a special kind because their ambitions were thwarted not only by the totalitarian atmosphere but also by the patriarchal mentality. No wonder, then, that it is more difficult for women to adapt to today’s new conditions.

Communism created an Orwellian world, indeed. The various benefits women enjoyed in the communist societies — such as full employment, free health care, maternity leave, and inexpensive abortions — only sound appealing to foreign observers, to whom these words have different and much more positive meanings. In Hungarian — as well as Czech, Slovak, Polish, or Russian — these words sound pitiful, cheap, poor, and gloomy, because that is the reality they evoke. When, in Hungary, we hear about free health care, we do not imagine an American hospital but rather an overcrowded, understaffed, underequipped, and underdeveloped East European hospital where doctors and nurses must be “tipped” for their services. When we hear about maternity leave, we know how little it pays and how the practice generates underachievement. These communist accomplishments have proved to be myths — the myth of full employment put women in underachieving jobs and the myth of free health care left them with rapidly deteriorating bodies and a complete lack of health awareness.

A. Mentality of Dependency

Although dependency is a mentality women share with men, it is manifested differently among women primarily by underachievement. What is at the root of this phenomenon? Cultural expectations reinforced what financial conditions necessitated: that women pursue careers only to the degree that their primary role as mother, wife, and housewife allowed. Having been forced to subordinate their work to their role as mothers, women often had jobs for which they were overqualified and which offered them little satisfaction and little money.

Today, a new option seems to be unemployment and welfare, and nonprofessional women are quick to use such opportunities reminiscent of the cheap securities of communism. It is still widespread (for both men and women) to collect unemployment benefits from their "official" job while moonlighting at a job in the "second economy." Unfortunately, the alternative of career advancement and full utilization of powers does not always appeal to professional women.

B. Mentality of Withdrawal

Dependency and withdrawal are closely related mentalities. Cultural patterns of feminine behavior (reinforced again by financial necessities) still seem to cultivate dependency on the male partner as well as withdrawal into the home. Both mentalities speak of weak individualistic goals and civic values.

The current political debate about the postponement of the retirement age for women was an interesting manifestation of this mentality of withdrawal. When asked, an overwhelming majority of women articulated their inertia by opting to keeping the mandatory age—fifty-five—introduced by the communists.

Communism created atomized societies, and atomization for women was even more acute than for men, with the family being their sole priority. The mentality of double dependency seems to counteract any horizontal ties of solidarity. Women today are less willing or able to participate in civic activities than are men; driven by a false sense of duty, women feel they cannot follow such pursuits from which "only" they would benefit personally. Hence, there is among women a general lack of interest

in women's organizations or women's issues. Very few attempts have been made to reverse this state of passivity and inertia.

A general lack of awareness also seems to underlie these mentalities. Women in Eastern Europe, often viewing life as a series of natural catastrophes to be accepted as they come, seem to have given up without even attempting to bring about real change in their lives. Communist and patriarchal societies bred men and women of a subservient attitude, who were no threat to the respective controlling powers. However, with the political and economic changes, it has become clear that survival itself depends on how individuals can rid themselves of these old mentalities.

V. Intellectual Life

It is probably fair to say that Hungary has, throughout its history, been most clearly European in its culture. This was so in spite of the social and economic conditions, which were most often less developed than in the Western part of Europe. Even, for example, during the darker times of Turkish or Austrian occupation, the intellectual output was not proportionately poorer than in independent countries with flourishing economies.

For centuries, Hungary's intelligentsia was part and parcel of Europe's intellectual elite. In the fifteenth century, the Renaissance court of Hungary's King Matthias attracted the most outstanding European artists and poets; the reformation of Calvin and Luther gained a following among the Hungarian theologians and laymen of Transylvania, the independent province. There were outstanding periods when the cultural climate of Hungary was thoroughly European—otherwise, Haydn would not have been in the employ of the Esterházys, nor would Gustav Mahler have been the director of the Budapest Opera.

There can be no doubt about the Europeaness of Hungary's culture over the centuries, but Hungarian people sometimes exaggerate this intellectual output. The general pride that Hungary has produced more Nobel laureates per capita than any other country is perhaps the most telling. The truth is that all Hungarian Nobel Prize winners left the country at some point, and just about all of them received the prize for work they did

elsewhere, i.e., in the West. Of course, these scientists are still a great asset to their mother country, and their high number speaks to the quality of Hungarian education, especially in the sciences. Unfortunately, today it is not clear whether these standards can be maintained. Among the myths of Hungarian intellectualism, the one about the high quality of Hungarian literature is a good case in point. The myth, laced with a dash of self-pity, says: "Had Hungarian writers written in a language other than Hungarian, the world would have known *our* Shakespeares and *our* Mark Twains as well."

Communists viewed intellectuals with instinctive suspicion. The world of the mind was considered the gravest threat to the communists, one to be controlled by all means. Among such conditions, writing performed a distorted function: to say indirectly that which could not be said directly. Literature, as well as scholarship, became politicized; in a sense, this function made literature less "literary." The good writer was expected to be the "conscience" of the nation, a person of moral courage.

A. Communism's "Politics of Culture"

Hungarian intellectualism during the communist decades manifested all of society's general ailments. Scientists, scholars, writers, and academics were supposed to depend on the state just as did other individuals. Many accepted this bargain and became dependent upon the state's cultural patronage.

There were other ways for "cultural politics" to seal off the Eastern part of Europe from the West. In spite of the supposed open-mindedness of the Hungarian communists, the cultural commissars maintained a firm grip on what people could read, write, say, and think. My own personal experience was that this grip had hardly eased even by the 1980s. Upon returning from a trip to New York, my copies of books by Solzhenitsyn, Churchill, and Betty Friedan were equally confiscated. Bookstores and libraries, even the best academic university libraries, also carried only those books permitted and tolerated by the cultural commissars. Naturally, only these commissars could give the green light to what books were to be translated and published by the state-owned publishing houses, which were intricately overseen by censors of many kinds.

For centuries, Hungary could boast of a book market sensitive to European currents. Hungary's professional classes then demanded, as well as guaranteed, that the major intellectual events of Europe and America find their way to Hungarian readers. A typical example is Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which first appeared in French in 1835 in Paris, three years after that in English in New York, and another three years later, in 1841, in Hungarian in Pest. Or, at a time when German was commonly spoken by the educated classes of Hungary, Freud and Jung were immediately translated for the general public in the first decades of the century. The few democratic years after World War II saw a boom in publication of translations as well; people were starved to read what they were not permitted during the war, so Walter Lippmann, Wendell Willkie, André Maurois, George Marshall, Stephen Vincent Benét, and Henry Steele Commager were immediately translated. This intellectual "gusto" is especially striking if one considers the starvation—or, at best, "diet" — that was to come again in the next several decades. Following the communist takeover of 1948, Hungary lost its tradition of keeping its book market up-to-date with European and other readings. The generations that grew up between 1948 and the mid- to late 1980s found themselves sealed off from most of the intellectual currents of Europe and the United States.

It is interesting to see what could *not* be translated and published in Hungary during the years of communism. Which authors were not supposed to be read? The following list is tentative and random, but perhaps it gives an idea of *what was missing* from the cultural currents of this once thoroughly European country.

Among the unavailable authors were such philosophers and thinkers as Alfred North Whitehead, Arnold Toynbee, Jacques Lacan, Arthur Koestler, Michael Polanyi, Ernst Cassirer, John Dewey, Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gaston Bachelard. Of the psychologists, Sigmund Freud reappeared only in the 1980s (at least in part); Carl Gustav Jung, Erik Erikson, and Abraham H. Maslow appeared not at all; and, especially painful is that such Hungarian-born giants as Sándor Ferenczi, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, and Károly Kerényi could hardly be read in Hungarian. Ferdinand de Saussure had to wait

fifty years to be published in Hungarian; Ludwig Wittgenstein, forty. Martin Buber and Elie Wiesel were too Jewish to appear at all; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner were probably too Catholic. Mahatma Gandhi was perhaps too disobedient and noncooperative; Betty Friedan and *all* the others too feminist. Literary censorship never allowed Ezra Pound to be translated in a separate volume.

All these absences created an extremely distorted intellectual life. There were too many missing links with the international intellectual community. Thawing began in the late 1980s, but only after the decisive changes of 1990 did state censorship completely disappear. Today everything can appear — and everything does, indeed. The publishing industry is booming; the only difficulty (apart from the high prices) is finding a book of artistic or intellectual value among the flood of paperback best-sellers and cookbooks.

The extensive list of long-overdue translations and publications are slowly being reduced, as masters from Freud to Ortega y Gasset are being rediscovered by the Hungarian reading public. Other kinds of cultural catching up will take much longer. During the forty to forty-five years of communism, the infrastructure of cultural knowledge was set back. Thus, the primary tools of intellectual work are missing: encyclopedias, word finders, thesauruses, dictionaries (except for foreign languages). We have no dictionaries of slang, synonyms, symbols, phrasal verbs, analogies, modern phrases, or quotations, no *Encyclopedia Hungarica*, no Hungarian version of *Roget's Thesaurus* or of Partridge's *Main Currents*. As for Hungarian literature, we have no anthologies like the Oxford Companions, the Nortons, or the McMichaels; no Hungarian version of a Herzberg Literature Encyclopedia, no Spiller or *Columbia Literary History*; practically no critical and annotated editions of major authors; no Riverside's Shakespeare.

What is true of the economy and of social development in general is equally true of the intellectual arena: communism not only froze the present but halted much of the future as well. It petrified certain spheres of life and prevented the emergence of free enterprise, free spirit, and creativity. This is the Orwellian meaning of the slogan under which Hungarians grew up: "Work in socialism is a free and creative enterprise."

VI. The Co-Responsibility of the West

Central Europeans see the responsibility of the West—or, more precisely, its co-responsibility, as Václav Havel put it¹⁴—in two ways, emotionally and rationally. Emotionally, they evoke scenes of “betrayal”: Versailles, Munich, and Yalta. Poles and Hungarians refer to John F. Kennedy’s speech of 1957 in the U.S. Senate, empathizing with the frustration of the Poles and Hungarians upon hearing that “the United States had never meant the obvious implications of its liberation policy.” Hungarians will remember the disappointment of Prime Minister Antall, who, in early 1990, was continuously cautioned by the various leading politicians of the West to go slow. It was a sobering antagonism: the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe were committed to dismantling communism, yet signals of encouragement were lagging behind. But the disappointment of Central Europeans in the West culminated after the euphoria of 1989–90 was over. This is the time labeled by Tsvetan Todorov, the Bulgarian-born structuralist, as “post-totalitarian depression,” a feeling of letdown experienced by Central and East Europeans after realizing that the West was not supporting them as enthusiastically as they had hoped.

At this point enter the rational arguments. The democratic community in the West was unprepared for the collapse of communism; they were prepared only for war and confrontation. The West did not think it necessary to prepare in any other way, since it looked utterly improbable that this colossal empire might collapse by itself. Nor was this collapse necessarily awaited. For many in the West, it looked—and perhaps still looks—much more comfortable to have Eastern Europe contained and by itself. The political systems in Hungary—and, to a lesser degree, in most other Central and East European countries—were, by this time, already quite far from Stalinism. Hungarian communism had a “human face”: it was not aggressive, growing less and less proud of its accomplishments, and humiliating the individual less and less frequently. Besides, this self-disciplined authoritarian system controlled itself: the Western world was not threatened by having to admit refugees and guest workers or by local conflicts awaiting solution. Because the communist countries closed the fences on themselves, they did not challenge the conscience of the West either.

Václav Havel detects a Western nostalgia for the simple world with a single adversary against whom the West stood united. There was a comfort in not having to deal with the countries individually, only as a block. The complexity today is perplexing. I am always reminded of what Emperor Joseph II, in Milos Forman's film *Amadeus*, says of Mozart's music: "Too many notes."

The inertia of the West is worrisome whether we examine it emotionally or rationally. "If the West, along with all the other democratic forces in the world, is incapable of rapidly engaging in the common creation of a new order in European and Euro-Asian affairs," President Havel says, "then someone else might as well begin to do the job."¹⁵ These are the words of a statesman concerned with the well-being of his people. Westerners, it might be argued, are not directly affected by the problems of Central and Eastern Europe. These states must take care of their problems themselves.

But there is more involved in this whole question than the future of Central and East European states. As a European intellectual, Havel is justly concerned for what he calls moral and metaphysical values such as "democracy, respect for human rights and for the order of nature, the freedom of the individual and the inviolability of his property, the feeling of co-responsibility for the world." Havel accuses the West of seeing only its immediate interests. For what is at stake in Central and Eastern Europe has a direct bearing on the West—the destiny of traditional values and the principles of Western civilization.

Notes

1. Françoise Thom, *Las fins du communism* (Paris: Criterion, 1994): 41.
2. Rudolf Andorka, "Változások és állandóságok a magyar társadalomban a rendszerváltozás óta," *Magyar Szemle* 3, no. 10 (October 1994): 1013. See also Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on Revolution in Europe* (London: Times Books, 1990).
3. Exod., 14:17–18; Num., 14:16, 29–33.
4. Rosenthal, *New York Times*, 9 August 1994.
5. *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 December 1994.
6. Talk given at the Budapest conference of social scientists in February 1995. Quoted by the Hungarian daily, *Új Magyarország*, 27 February 1995.
7. See Michael Jordan, *Budapest Sun*, 27 April–3 May 1995.

8. Anne Applebaum, "The Fall and Rise of the Communists — Guess Who's Running Eastern Europe?" *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 6 (November/December 1994): 7–13.
9. Elemér Hankiss, "What the Hungarians Saw First" in Gwyn Prins, ed., *Spring in Winter: The 1989 Revolutions* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1990): 13–36.
10. See Rudolf Andorka, "Változások és állandóságok a magyar társadalomban a rendszerváltozás óta," *Magyar Szemle* 3, no. 10 (October 1994): 1012–23.
11. Attila Ágh, *168 óra*, 26 February 1991.
12. Daniel Odeschalchi, "When Democracy Is Mistaken for Chaos," *Budapest Sun*, 2–8 June 1994: 4.
13. Ibid.
14. Václav Havel, "A Call for Sacrifice: The Co-Responsibility of the West," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (March/April 1994): 2–7.
15. Ibid.

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